



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE LETTERS OF HENRY JAMES¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

IT is significant that the first of these wonderful letters ends with a spontaneous expression of affectionate tenderness—"dear girl, and dear incomparable all"; and that in the last of them, written a few months before his death, the writer is, to a friend of only six years' standing, "fondestly yours." For half a century Henry James poured himself out to his friends in letters that are matchless for their prodigal and eager flow of sympathy, their inexhaustible kindness, their ample and exquisite tenderness, their beautiful generosity.

There are more than 400 letters and almost a thousand pages in Mr. Lubbock's priceless assemblage, and they extend from the fourth year following the Civil War to the second year of the World War; from James Russell Lowell to H. G. Wells; from Henry James's twenty-sixth year to that convulsed and final winter of 1915-16 when, stunned and outraged and engulfed by the monstrous anomaly, he shrouded his soul in the mists of his beloved London and, with a last weary gesture of unspeakable indignation, went to his cloudy immortality.

He died an avowed and legalized Englishman. It is pleasant to reflect that he was vouchsafed the opportunity to shuffle off the coil of his abhorred Americanism while there was still time to savor the ecstasy of being a subject of George the Fifth. He could not conceivably have been a happy American after he had known England. The English scene was as necessary to his functioning as is a dark-room to the development of a photographic plate. Henry James as a contented and productive American is as unimaginable as an aeroplane flying in a coal mine. It is as

¹ *The Letters of Henry James.* Selected and Edited by Percy Lubbock. Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1920.

absurd to wonder at or to resent his passionate expatriation as it would be to feel aggrieved surprise at the inclination of a drowning man toward a life-preserver. Henry James could no more tolerate the air of These States than a human lung can tolerate sea-water. His reminiscent loathing of America, his horror at the thought of a repeated visit, his shuddering repugnance whenever the memory or the threat of his native land emerged, were inevitable and incurable.

But this emotion constitutes almost the only vein of unamiability in all the large, rich, tolerant, magnificently benign expanse of the Letters. Their benevolence is extraordinary—their benevolence and their undammed emotional exuberance. It is amusing to read these Letters in the light of one's memory of those ancient prepossessions concerning the vaporous attenuations of Henry James' psychic microcosm. That dull and stupid illusion of bloodlessness, of an inner world of rarefied complexities, exhibiting a passionateness only spectral and alembicated—how grotesque those fumbling incomprehensions seem as we get to know more and more intimately the essential James! They never, of course, were possible to anyone who had recognized his fundamental simplicity, ardor, and expansiveness, his spiritual naïveté, the perfect openness and confiding guilelessness of his approach.

His friendly and torrential copiousness must often have smitten with guilt his more sensitive correspondents. Was not Edmund Gosse overwhelmed with contrition when he received from H. J. that marvellous effusion provoked by Gosse's inquiry about Maupassant's legend of the two Englishmen and the Monkey? Here is a little of it: "I didn't in the least know that M. was going to be so remarkable . . . I didn't even know that the monkey was going to be, or even realize the peculiar degree and nuance of the preserved lustre awaiting ces messieurs . . . Guy's story dropped into my mind but as an unrelated thing, or rather as one related, and indeed with much intensity, to the peculiarly 'rum,' weird, macabre and unimaginative light in which the interesting, or in other words the delirious, in English conduct and in English character, are—or were especially then—viewed in French circles sufficiently self-respecting to have views on the general matter at all, or in other words among the truly refined and enquiring . . . Really what has remained with me is but the note of two elements—that of

the Monkey's jealousy, and that of the Monkey's death; how brought about the latter I can't at all at this time of day be sure, though I am haunted as with the vague impression that the poor beast figured as having somewhat destroyed *himself*, committed suicide through the separate *injuria formae* . . . Some thin ghost of an impression abides with me that the 'jealousy' was more on the Monkey's part toward him than on his toward the Monkey; with which the circumstance that the Death I seem most (yet so dimly) to disembroil is simply and solely, or at least predominantly . . ."

You wonder how Gosse must have felt if it shamefully occurred to him that he had diverted the whole elaborate, formidable, rumbling, earth-shaking machinery of Henry James' expository mechanism from its possible employment in evolving another *Golden Bowl* to the accommodating projection of an anecdote about a monkey. If we had been Gosse, we could not easily have survived.

Mr. Lubbock, in his admirable commentary upon the Letters, speaks of H. J.'s generous conception of the humblest correspondent's claim on him for response. He could not answer a brief note of friendliness save with pages of abounding eloquence. "He never dealt in the mere small change of intercourse; the post-card and the half-sheet did not exist for him; a few lines of enquiry would bring from him a bulging packet of manuscript, overwhelming in its disproportion. No wonder that with this standard of the meaning of a letter he often groaned under his postal burden. He discharged himself of it, in general, very late at night; the morning's work left him too much exhausted for more composition until then. At midnight he would sit down to his letter-writing and cover sheet after sheet, sometimes for hours, with his dashing and not very readable script. Occasionally he would give up a day to the working off of arrears by dictation, seldom omitting to excuse himself to each correspondent in turn for the infliction of the 'fierce legibility' of type. The number of his letters was in fact enormous."

Exuberance, ardor, responsiveness — those are the salient notes of the chord that is struck and sustained throughout this astonishing epistolary fantasia. He writes to "Dear Edith" [Mrs. Wharton] that "it hideously looks" as if he hadn't "deeply revelled and rioted" in her "beau-

tiful letter"—which "thrilled me to the core." Again, he feels his long silence to be "hideous and infamous." The effect of a volume of his brother William's philosophical essays was "exquisitely and adorably cumulative." English will not, at times, contain the bubbling and welling current of his utterance, and it overflows in barbarous and amusing international blends: "I can bear tragedies so little—*Tout se rattache so à the thing.*"

The present of a leather dressing-case from Mr. W. V. R. Berry provoked him to a thousand-word deprecation that must have caused Mr. Berry to wonder what reaction a more imposing gift would have produced:

I can't live with him [the dressing-case] you see; because I can't live up to him. His claims, his pretensions, his dimensions, his assumptions and consumptions, above all the manner in which he causes every surrounding object (on my poor premises or within my poor range) to tell a dingy or deplorable tale—all this makes him the very scourge of my life, the very blot on my scutcheon. He doesn't regild that rusty metal—he simply takes up an attitude of gorgeous swagger, straight in front of all the rust and the rubbish, which makes me look as if I had stolen *somebody* else's (re-garnished *blason*) and were trying to palm it off as my own. . . . I simply can't *afford* him, and that is the sorry homely truth. *He is out of the picture*—out of *mine*; and behold me condemned to live forever with that canvas turned to the wall. Do you know what that means?—to have to give up going about at all, lest complications (of the most incalculable order) should ensue from its being seen what I go about *with*. *Bonne renommée vaut mieux que sac-de-voyage doré*, and though I may have had weaknesses that have brought me a little under public notice, my modest hold-all (which has accompanied me in most of my voyage through life) has at least, so far as I know, never *fait jaser*. . . . That you shouldn't have counted the cost—to yourself—that is after all perhaps conceivable (*quoiqu' à peine!*) but that you shouldn't have counted the cost to *me*, to whom it spells ruin: *that* ranks you with one of those great lurid, though lonely, romantic and historic figures and charmers who have scattered their affections and lavished their favors only (as it has presently appeared) to consume and to destroy! More prosaically, dearest Walter (if one of the most lyric acts recorded in history—and one of the most finely æsthetic. . . .

—and so on, for another page or two. Delicious virtuosity it is, no doubt: but what an awe-inspiring surplus of energy, and time, and generosity it connotes, and what an almost devastating passion of obligation it suggests in poor H. J.! But he was like that. If you sat at his table, or even came to his back door, the least that you could be dismissed with was a whole chicken and an unravished layer-cake, lighted

with as many candles as your assumed years had indicated—unless you asked for H. J.'s autograph, which would at once place you among those whom his heart was "absolutely hard against"—"one of the vulgarest and dustiest and poorest" products of America the unspeakable.

"Only difficulty interests me," he says somewhere in these Letters. Only difficulty, and kindliness, and the instant flash of sympathy and its studiously nourished flame, and the opportunity to respond—to lend, to give, to resound to: that, as it seems, was his perpetual concern. And he spent himself fabulously in the enterprise.

His luxuriance of feeling, of cerebration, of expression, is astounding, but so are his tact and his finesse. The miracle is that his superabundance never becomes oppressive; his ceremonial elaborateness is never pompous, never ornate. His tact, his humor, his infallible awareness, never desert him. It is endlessly delightful to see him adjusting the quality of his discourse to the ear that is to receive it, conforming his delivery to the character of the occasion, of the mood, of the recipient, with delicate and perfect rightness. His letters to Hugh Walpole are one thing; to Wells quite another thing; to Gosse and Howells and A. C. Benson and W. E. Norris, utterly distinct and precisely aimed.

He met the most difficult occasions with consummate justness. It is hard to imagine anything more perfect in tone, in exquisite appropriateness of gesture, than the triumphantly felicitous letter of thanks which he wrote in acknowledgment of the tribute offered to him by two hundred and seventy of his friends upon his seventieth birthday, in the form of a letter, a piece of plate, and a request that he sit for his portrait. "I have tried," he wrote Lubbock, "to steer a middle way between hysterical emotion and marble immortality." Well, he did. The letter is too long for full reproduction; but here is an example of its easy riding over perilous gulfs:

Let me acknowledge with boundless pleasure the singularly generous and beautiful letter, signed by your great and dazzling array and reinforced by a correspondingly bright material gage, which reached me on my recent birthday, April 15th. It has moved me as brave gifts and benedictions can only do when they come as signal surprises. I seem to wake up to an air of breathing good will the full sweetness of which I had never yet tasted. . . . You tell me together, making one rich tone of your many voices, almost the whole story of my social experience [in England], which I have reached the right

point of living over again, with all manner of old times and places reviewed, old wonderments and pleasures reappeared and recaptured—so that there is scarce one of your ranged company but makes good the particular connection, quickens the excellent relation, lights some happy train and flushes with some individual color. I pay you my very best respects while I receive from your two hundred and fifty pair of hands, and more, the admirable, the inestimable bowl, and while I engage to sit, with every accommodation, to the so markedly indicated “one of you,” my illustrious friend Sargent . . . I remain all faithfully and gratefully yours,

HENRY JAMES.

Commiseration for him as a yielder of exorbitantly demanded largess is probably misplaced. His gayety is inveterate. To Charles Eliot Norton he writes from Lamb House, Rye (November, 1899) that he must presently take on himself “a care that may make you smile; nothing less than to proceed, a few moments hence, to Dover, to meet our celebrated friend (I think she can’t *not*¹ be yours) Mrs. Jack Gardner, who arrives from Brussels, charged with the spoils of the Flemish school, and kindly pays me a fleeting visit on her way up to town. I must rush off, help her to disembark, see all her Van Eycks and Rubenses through the Customs and bring her hither, where three water-colors and four photographs of the ‘Rye School’ will let her down easily.” He can be frivolous to Howells about the ineffable *Wings of the Dove*—“too long-winded and minute a thing, but well-meaning.” He can even be light-hearted about a certain understudy for coffee—“a coffee reduced to second childhood, the prattle of senility . . . it interposes a little ease after the long and unattenuated grimness of cocoa.” To “a delightful young man from Texas” [the inimitable Stark Young], who had written, through a friend, to ask for guidance in the study of H. J.’s books, he sent two alternative lists.² “When it comes to the shorter tales,” he observed, “the question is more difficult (for characteristic selection) and demands separate treatment. Come to me about that, dear young man from Texas, later on—you shall have your little tarts when you have eaten your beef and potatoes.” He avoided Daudet’s funeral, as he explained to Miss Grace Norton, because he felt he

¹ This is a favorite locution of H. J.’s.

² Here they are, incidentally: The first list:—(1) *Roderick Hudson*. (2) *The Portrait of a Lady*. (3) *The Princess Cassamassima*. (4) *The Wings of the Dove*. (5) *The Golden Bowl*. The second list (this, H. J. says, “is, as it were, the more ‘advanced’”):—(1) *The American*. (2) *The Tragic Muse*. (3) *The Wings of the Dove*. (4) *The Ambassadors*. (5) *The Golden Bowl*.

should "go mad" if he "even once more, let alone twenty times more, heard Daudet personally compared (more especially *facially* compared, eyeglass and all) to Jesus Christ. Not a French notice of him that I have seen but has plumped it coquettishly out."

The aesthetic judgment scattered up and down the Letters are often, naturally, of the last acuteness . . . In the Letters of George Meredith he found little sustenance. He speaks shrewdly of "their rather marked non-illustration of his intellectual wealth . . . He was *starved*, to my vision, in many ways—and that makes him but the more nobly pathetic . . . The whole moral side of him throws out some splendidly clear lights—while the 'artist,' the secondary Shakespeare, remains curiously dim . . . It abides with us, I think, that Meredith was an admirable spirit even if not an *entire* mind." Eighteen years earlier, however, a reading of *Lord Ormont* had aroused his ire, and he had written to Gosse, with singular impatience and obtuseness, that in *Lord Ormont* there was "not a figure presented, not a scene constituted"! You wonder if, later, he re-read and re-valued that work of indisputable genius.

H. G. Wells was always, to some extent, grit in his teeth, though, after reading *The New Machiavelli*, he saluted him as "much the most interesting and masterful prose-painter of your English generation . . . Your big feeling for life, your capacity for chewing up the thickness of the world in such enormous mouthfuls . . . this constitutes for me a rare and admirable and wonderful exhibition on your part." But to Gosse he spoke later of the "weakness and looseness" of Wells' fabric, "the utter going by the board of any real self-respect of composition and of expression." A few years later, however, he told Wells that his "faculty" was "of the highest price": "Your temper and your hand form one of the choicest treasures of our time."

For Kipling he exhibits a progressive dislike. In 1896 he is "laid low" by "the absolutely uncanny talent—the prodigious special faculty," of *The Seven Seas*. "It's all *violent*, without the charm of a nuance or a hint of 'distinction'; all prose trumpets and castanets and such—with never a touch of the fiddle-string or a note of the nightingale. But it's magnificent and masterly in its way, and full of the most insidious art. He's a rum 'un—and one of the

very few first *talents* of the time." A year later his view of Kipling's "prose future" "has much shrunken in the light of one's increasingly observing how little of life he can make use of—almost nothing civilized save steam and patriotism—and the latter only in verse, where I *hate* it so, especially mixed up with God and goodness . . . In his earliest time I thought he perhaps contained the seeds of an English Balzac; but I have quite given that up in proportion as he has come steadily from the less simple in subject to the more simple—from the Anglo-Indians to the natives, from the natives to the Tommies, from the Tommies to the quadrupeds, from the quadrupeds to the fish, and from the fish to the engines and screws." Kipling's "exploitation of the patriotic idea" seemed to him (later still) "not really much other than the exploitation of the name of one's mother or one's wife. Two or three times a century—yes; but not every month."

.

Always you see him clinging to his implicational world, that world where processes were comparatively negligible, and fruitions everything, or nearly everything. As Mr. Lubbock penetratingly says of him, he found in the social scene, wherever its "crude beginnings have been left furthest behind, wherever its forms have been most rubbed and toned by the hands of succeeding penetrations . . . not an obliteration of sharp character, but a positive enhancement of it, with the whole of its past crowded into its bosom. He clung to civilization, he was faithful throughout to a few yards of town pavement, not because he was scared by the rough freedom of the world, but rather because he was impatient of its insipidity."

It is perhaps undesirable to wonder how he would have regarded the publishing of his letters. He confessed to Howells in 1893 "a morbid passion for personal privacy and a standing quarrel with the blundering publicity of the age . . . The sight of my own name on a printed page makes me . . . ill." No doubt he outgrew this indisposition. And the kind of "publicity" involved in Mr. Lubbock's discreet and skillful management of the Letters is very far from "blundering." And yet . . . one has a stab of compunction at many points, where the quivering of the wounded flesh is hard to look upon—as in that unspeakably touching post-

script to the letter announcing to Miss Norton the death of William James. That cry of his brother's—"Think of us, dear Grace, think of us!"—is terrible to overhear.

But these Letters are priceless, and one would not relinquish them, whatever measure of guilt their possession may involve. They are too corroborating in their disclosures to be foregone. They reestablish one's assurance of the occasional passage through life of those who care supremely for what it is probably the most dubious wisdom to prize at all—that love of "the finer grain," that quest for the ultimate sources of beauty and sincerity, which was his changeless passion.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.